

EPA's Draft Strategy on Animal Feeding Operations

On February 19, 1998, at Baltimore's Inner Harbor, President Clinton and Vice President Gore announced the Administration's Clean Water Action Plan to finish the job of cleaning up America's rivers, lakes and coastal waters to protect the environment and health of all Americans. A key element of that Plan called for a strategy to control water pollution coming from animal feeding operations -- release of this Strategy is the first key action implemented under the Clean Water Action Plan.

Background

Animal Feeding Operations, or AFOs, are agricultural facilities that confine feeding activities, thereby concentrating animal populations and manure. Animal waste, if not managed properly, can run off farms and pollute nearby water bodies. Agricultural runoff, rich in nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus, has been linked to dangerous toxic microorganisms such as *Pfiesteria piscicida*. *Pfiesteria* is widely believed to be responsible for major fish kills and disease events in several mid-Atlantic states and may pose a risk to human health.

There were about 450,000 animal feeding operations in 1994. About 6,600 of these operations fall in to the largest category and are referred to as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOs, which confine larger numbers of animals, therefore posing a greater threat to the environment and public health.

Less than 25 percent of these larger operations currently have Clean Water Act permits to control the amount of wastes that run off into waterways. This reflects the historical focus of the Act to first control pollution from industrial facilities and sewage treatment plants rather than problems caused by agricultural and urban runoff.

The Strategy: Protecting the Environment and Public Health

The strategy will protect our rivers, lakes and coastal waters from polluted runoff by:

- Setting new national standards for allowable levels of pollution in runoff from from poultry and swine facilities by December, 2001 and from cattle and dairy operations by 2002.
- Issuing permits to limit pollution from runoff for the largest CAFOs by 2002, and from all other large feeding operations and priority facilities in impaired watersheds by 2005.
- Improving compliance and enforcement of existing regulations by working with states to inspect those facilities that present the greatest threats to the environment and public health within three years and all large feedlot operations within five years.

- Focusing enforcement and permitting efforts on those watersheds most vulnerable to pollution from animal feeding operations.
- Expanding the scope of permitting through Administrative actions in the near term and through regulatory changes by 2001, to include for the first time, national efforts to manage pollution associated with the land application of manure.
- Continuing dialogues with the animal agricultural industries, environmental organizations, and community organizations.
- Preparing a unified national strategy under EPA and USDA leadership to control pollution from feedlot operations by November 1998.

Environmental Benefits

The new strategy will result in the following environmental improvements.

- Reductions in manure runoff will decrease the amount of nutrients (e.g., nitrogen, phosphorus) entering water bodies. Excessive nutrient levels have been responsible for hypoxia (low levels of dissolved oxygen) and anoxia (absence of dissolved oxygen) in surface waters throughout the United States, including the “Dead Zone” in the Gulf of Mexico, the Chesapeake Bay, and elsewhere, and linked to *pfisteria*.
- Reductions in leaching from manure storage lagoons will protect groundwater resources from nitrate or pathogen contamination. Protection of both surface and ground water resources will also protect drinking water systems throughout the United States.
- While a definitive conclusion has yet to be reached, many scientists believe that high levels of nutrients led to the *Pfiesteria piscicida* outbreaks in North Carolina and Maryland and Virginia tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay. Addressing manure runoff from AFOs will minimize one identified source of nutrients to these waters.